WHAT WONDEROUS LOVE IS THIS?
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John 3:1-17

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."
John 3:16 (NRSV)

Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open us, by your Spirit, to new truth revealed in Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.

In a recent column, distinguished historian Martin Marty referred to the publicity the president of Harvard University, Laurence Summers, has been receiving lately because of problems he has been having with his faculty. First he insulted his Afro-American Studies Department, and then he vetoed offers to two academic superstars because they were 54. His dean explained that the president is "concerned about the problem of extinct volcanoes," academic giants past their prime.

Marty's column was prompted by the convergence of that news —which is of great interest to academic types—with his own 74th birthday. Without being unkind or even a bit defensive, Marty—acknowledging that he is fully twenty years older than the two "extinct volcanoes"—gently reminded the president of Harvard, and all of the rest of us, that

At 74, Franz Liszt performed in Luxemburg
At 75, "Foxy Grandpa" Ed Delano bicycled 3,100 miles to his class reunion
At 76, Angelo Guiseppe Roncalli became Pope John XXIII
At 80, George Burns won an Oscar, Marc Chagall created sets and costumes for the Met's *Magic Flute,* and jockey Levi Burlingame was still racing
At 81, Benjamin Franklin helped frame the Constitution, Goethe finished *Faust,* and Churchill started his *History of the English-Speaking People*
At 88, Pablo Cassals was performing
At 89, Albert Schweitzer was doctoring
And at 90, Picasso, always a volcano, was far from extinct

"You get the idea?" said the 74-year-old Marty, whose own schedule is filled with travel, lecturing, consulting, and writing for years ahead and who is a very active volcano (*Christian Century,* 20 January 2002).

All of which can serve as introductory commentary on a tiny vignette hidden away in the first lesson this morning. Did you hear it?

> The Lord said to Abram [and Sarah], "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you. I will make of you a great nation." . . . So Abram [and Sarah] went. . . . Abram was 75 years old when he went."

That detail is preserved in the ancient text for a reason, I take it. Seventy-five, even three thousand years ago, is not the time when you pack up your belongings, move to a new place, and start a brand new life. At 75, society expects you, if not to act like an extinct volcano, to act your age and at least bank your fires. In Abraham's nomadic society, it was a major goal to accumulate enough cattle and property and wealth to make the life of a nomad—wandering endlessly about—unnecessary. The idea was to get to a place where you never had to move again, never change anything again. So the story is about two people who have reached this life goal, who have achieved stability, and when the voice of God tells them to get up and move, they don't even have a clear destination. There will be a land and a great nation, but for now there's just the two of them and the voice leading them into the unknown.

Walter Brueggemann says about the incident, "The command relates not only to geography. God invites Abraham and Sarah to embrace newness, to go where they has never been, to depart all familiar markings. . . . This [invitation] makes people of faith habitually restless, ready to dare, trusting only in the promise of the one who speaks it. Faith is, indeed, the capacity to risk what is at hand for what is yet to be given" (*Texts for Preaching*).

I read that on Tuesday morning and picked up the phone and called Joanna and Al Adams. Joanna is my new colleague and Co-Pastor. At that very moment, Joanna and Al were watching all their belongings being loaded onto a moving van to head north to Chicago. "Joanna," I said, "listen to what Brueggemann has to say about you: 'God's invitation requires Abraham and Sarah to embrace newness, to go where they have never been before and to depart all the familiar markings.'" We laughed. She and Al have never lived anywhere but the South, for more than 30 years in Atlanta. "Well," she said, "we're sitting here in the middle of all these boxes, eating barbecue sandwiches, familiar markings we're going to miss." I assured her that somewhere in this great city they will find satisfactory barbecue. But the story did and does have a remarkable coherence—to their experience and the experience of this congregation.

We're headed for something brand new, for an unfamiliar place, and I love Brueggemann's assertion that people of faith are habitually restless, that faith is "the capacity to risk what is at hand for what is yet to be given."

I love the fact that centuries later, when Paul is trying to explain to new Christian believers what faith looks like, he points to Abraham and Sarah. "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," Paul said.

That's a very different definition of what it means to be righteous. A religious person, a faithful, righteous person, is one who is morally good and clean and pure according to most definitions. The righteousness traditionally promoted by religion is basically defined in negative terms, avoiding what the religion or culture or both regard as wrongful, immoral, or sinful behavior. In

fact, defining what is righteous and unrighteous and then enforcing a code of moral behavior is what religion is about mostly. It is certainly what Islamic fundamentalism is about: defining and rigidly, sometimes violently, enforcing a moral code. Jewish and Christian fundamentalisms often behave in the same way when they have the political power to do so. And so it is always something of a shock to be reminded that here, at the very genesis of Judeo-Christian faith, is a radically unreligious affirmation. In this tradition and the religion it spawns, righteousness and faithfulness will be defined as a person's responsiveness to the call of God to become something new, to venture into uncharted territory, to walk into a future based on the promises of God, a future full of newness and possibility and hope. It is always a little breathtaking to me to be reminded that at the very heart of my faith tradition there is an idea that holds up a new and refreshing idea of faith—not as moral purity, not as theological correctness, but as the risky responsiveness to God's summons to leave certainty behind and walk into a new future trusting God.

This story and its message comes to us—Presbyterians—at a critical and difficult moment in our life as a denomination. I know that not all of you are Presbyterians—but most of you are and this church is one of the 11,000 congregations that constitute the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a denomination of more that 2.5 million members. We were in the newspapers this week, and again it was about sex. "Presbyterian majority votes against allowing gay clergy," the *Tribune* headline announced last Thursday. A majority of our presbyteries—local jurisdictions—voted not to extend the right to ordain and install as church officers and ministers gay and lesbian persons who are sexually active. The ban includes not just ministers but elders and deacons, who are also ordained in our tradition. It is not a topic I particularly want to continue defining us. But every time we talk about and vote on it, it gets us in the newspapers and deeply divides us as a denomination. And so bear with me for a moment.

It was five years ago that as a result of a carefully planned effort by conservative Presbyterians an amendment was added to the constitution of the church that reads

> Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the Confession calls sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and sacrament. [G-60106 b]

I thought that it was a mistake to put that in our constitution and I believe it even more deeply today, five years later. Ironically, the General Assembly that adopted that amendment, by a narrow margin, elected me to be its Moderator and for a year it was my responsibility to travel throughout the Presbyterian family, representing the national church and always, everywhere, dealing with the repercussions of this restrictive provision.

What is wrong with it? It sounds all right on the surface. But there's plenty wrong with it in my mind.

It calls us to obey scripture without saying which scripture and without allowing for interpretation. It is a fundamentalist requirement. We Presbyterians have never been literalists. We honor and believe in the responsibility to interpret scripture. We obey Jesus Christ, our Lord, and interpret all of scripture in light of him, what he said and what he did.

There are only a few instances when the Bible talks about the topic. Jesus never mentioned it. And scholars disagree about what exactly the Bible means when it does mention it. The majority of biblical scholars on the faculties of Presbyterian theological seminaries do not believe the passages in the Bible on the topic warrant the flat-out prohibition of ordaining on this basis alone.

It calls us to conform to the historic confessional standards of our church without saying which ones. Among our historic Confessions, some of which were written in the heat and violence of the Reformation, are rabidly anti-Papal, anti-Catholic statements. And so we Presbyterian have always wisely said that we are guided by our Confessions but we most certainly don't conform to them.

It says that anyone who does not repent of anything our Book of Confession calls sin may not serve as a deacon, elder, or minister. Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Seminary, points out that essentially eliminates all of us: those of us guilty of usury—i.e., who receive interest income on our investments—those who are wearing religious jewelry, or those who will do a little work today, the Sabbath.

But finally everyone knows what this is about. It is about turning the Presbyterian church, with its great tradition of liberal openness to the Spirit of God, into a much narrower, more conservative, far more rigid religious tradition. This provision would require the church to be interested in, to inquire into, sexual behavior that many of us regard as private and personal and a matter of personal moral conscience. And it is about homosexuality, ultimately, and the effort to define it in a way that places it outside the boundaries of appropriate and acceptable Christian behavior.

I disagree with that. I didn't always, but I do now. I don't think we know enough about the mystery of human sexuality, nor have we achieved anything close to a consensus about what the Bible means by what it says, to be sure of ourselves on the topic. And insofar as I am able, I will not allow or participate in what I regard as inappropriate invasion of privacy and personal integrity.

And insofar as I am able, I will encourage this congregation to choose its leaders as it always has, on the basis of far older constitutional standards. This is historically what Presbyterians have expected of their leaders:

> Those who undertake a particular ministry should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be demonstrative of the Christian Gospel in the Church and in the world. [G-60106]

I take this stand on the basis of the oldest, most traditional part of the Presbyterian Constitution written in 1788 and which reads

> God alone is the Lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any way contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. [G-10301]

Those of us who believe as I do are now officially a minority in the PC(USA). I have many friends with whom I disagree on this matter and whom I continue to respect as brothers and sisters in Christ. Some of them wish we would be quiet now or leave. I will do neither. I will continue to try to find ways to live together in a church that includes a variety of convictions and opinions on this and other matters. And I will pray and work as I have for 40 years for the peace and purity and unity of the church I love.

God, I believe, calls us to let go of old certainties, old truths even, in order to be faithful to new possibilities, new truth. I believe God is calling us to let go on this one and to move ahead.

That is what the Abraham and Sarah story says. And it is the essence of that familiar story of the man who came to see Jesus one time at night. Nicodemus was his name. He was settled. He was a Pharisee, a religious official who knew and zealously kept the religious law. He studied it, discussed it, interpreted it, applied it. He lived his religion every minute of every day as it was defined by the law, all those rules and regulations. Strangely, he comes to see the young rabbi at night. I suppose he doesn't want to be seen.

They talk, and it's a difficult, almost tortured conversation.

"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God," he says.

And Jesus replies, "You must be born again"

Nicodemus, settled, stable, past the age when you change your mind or think new thoughts or seek new truth, says, "Can one enter a second time the mother's womb?"

He's a fundamentalist. He can't recognize a good metaphor when he stumbles into it.

This is about newness, Nicodemus. This is about letting go of old truths, old definitions, old traditions, old theological certainties, and allowing God to lead you into a new and open-ended, hope-filled future.

And then perhaps the most important religious statement anybody every made. The most incredible and critical theological affirmation:

> For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish [which means "be lost"] but may have eternal life.

God so loves the world. This is about a God radically redefined—not in terms of power, or judgment, or punishment, but in terms of love.

This is about a God who does not wait in holy splendor for men and women to prostrate themselves, to beg for mercy, or to devote their lives to being pure enough to warrant God's approval. This is about a God who loves so much a son is given.

And this is about Nicodemus—you and me—who are the ones now loved, the ones invited to stand up and hold our heads high because we are loved by God, the ones invited to love the world as much as God loves it, to love one another as we are loved.

This is about a wondrous love, from the heart of God, given without condition; a love so wondrous it lays down life itself; a love that asks only that we accept it, receive it, allow it to re-create us, rebirth us; a love that asks us only to trust the one who gives it—with our lives, our future.

Amen.

Prayers of the People
By John H. Boyle, Parish Associate

Living and loving God, your love is a spendthrift, and you lavish it upon us and all people with reckless abandon and in ways that are both as obvious as a brilliant sunset and as subtle as the gentle rustle of grass. You call us to love one another, and without your Spirit there is no way we can do that. Even with your Spirit, given who we are as finite and flawed human beings, we can only hope to approximate such wild and reckless love, especially for those we find most difficult to notice long enough to try to love and whom we are prone to treat with the most extreme form of hostility—our indifference.

Yet we would be open to your call as best we know how, O God, and we pray for guidance and strength to love as you love, to risk as you risk, and to trust you to fill in the gaps where we fail.

In a world in which hoarded power is so often used to lord it over others, whether in the corridors of the corporate world or in the precincts of political action or in the hallways of ecclesiastical bodies, help us to resist the temptation to hold our hands in tightly clenched fists of power, lest they become hands of horror rather than hands of healing. Grant us vision, O God, but save us from grandiosity that traps us in the tyranny of our own ideas rather than allows us to be open to those of others. And in the midst of life's ambiguities and perplexing paradoxes, when it seems that whatever we do is less than perfect, help us to learn to live possessed of the courage of imperfection that relies upon your grace more than merely upon our own merit.

God of compassion, be merciful to the sick who are stripped of vigor and imprisoned within their helplessness, that they may have courage to accept and bear the burden of their pain, patience to overcome disabilities, and serenity in the face of uncertainty. And to those who are exhausted by

sorrow, grant the consolation of your presence and the awareness that a love forgotten is a love dead and that while it lives, there will be suffering in it as well as joy.

We give you thanks for your world, dear God, which in spite of its brokenness and bloodshed still reflects the beauty of your creation. We are grateful for your good gift of life and for your love that enables us to love others in special ways. We give thanks for friendships that nurture and sustain us and for your church, which with all its shortcomings continues to embody your love in the world. We pray for your world and for the church of Jesus Christ wherever it is gathered, that through her witness to your love the day will come when the world will be covered with the canopy of your peace.

Bless the leadership of our nation as it seeks to deter terrorism and to bring relief to those decimated by the carnage of war. May we all so order our lives that even when we may not be able to make everyone our friend, we can try to make no one our enemy.

And when, O Lord, we find ourselves discouraged to the point of despair or embittered to the point of cynicism, remind us of the one who long ago knelt in a garden and prayed, "nevertheless not my will but yours be done."

We pray in his dear name and with his words, saying, Our Father . . .

Amen.